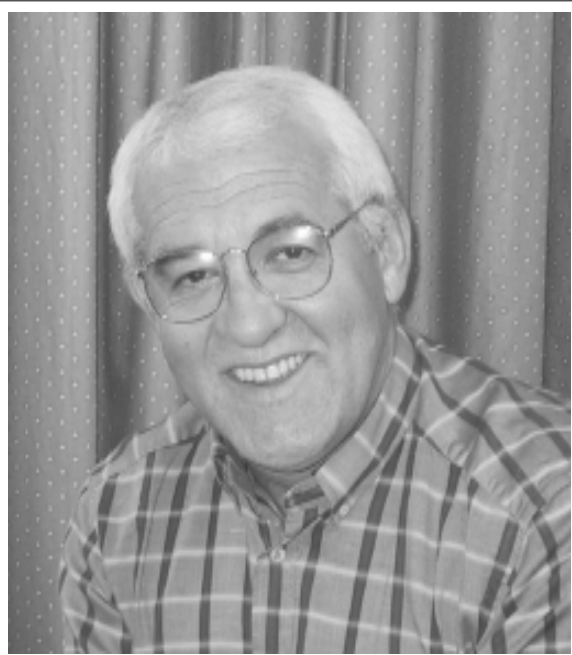


## Keynote addresses

### Pedagogy for the future: Building teacher professional learning

David McRae



We are here to do business.

Some of the business is to share and celebrate past work and achievements, and that must be done. I will speak later about the evidence available from Commonwealth funded NSW QTP projects which suggests that they have been well formulated, respectful of ideas about best practice, and very well received by participants.

This in itself confirms a belief that we all share, however implicitly and understated. That is that formal learning is both valuable and satisfying, and that it makes a difference to the way we behave. We seek rational solutions to problems and act on those solutions. We seek and believe in the process of establishing evidence, but not uncritically. We have the capacity to describe, measure and reflect on our own experiences and insert that thinking into planning and implementing further action.

You are going to be considering five 'P's related to teacher professional learning at this conference—Purpose, Practice, Policy, Professional Communities and Professional Status—a comprehensive and somewhat daunting set of 'P's.

The other business we are here to do is to look forward in terms of those five 'P's. We are here to investigate and discuss ways of building teacher professional learning, of using what we know supported by other evidence to improve things for the future.

In your syndicate sessions you will be asked to respond to some of the deep questions about teacher professional learning. They are hard questions, some of them are particularly tough, and they have been the subject of a great deal of informed speculation and research. I will suggest that in some cases a fair degree of consensus has been reached about the answers, but reaching a consensus in theory does not of course mean that that is what we do.

When we're talking about these questions, it will be useful to remember that we're talking about people, people operating in a very human enterprise; and human enterprises always have wayward elements. They are rich, dense, complex. They operate in widely varying contexts against a background of diverse personal experience and views. The word 'rich' is often used when talking about the issues we will be considering. I would like you to remember that 'rich' does not have the unalloyed connotation of 'good'.

There will be three broad parts to my presentation. Firstly I would like to say something about the goals of QTP in New South Wales and what they suggest about current thinking about teacher professional learning. Secondly I want to direct my attention to some of the questions you will be considering in your syndicate groups. Lastly to help stimulate debate I want to focus on a number of ideas about practice which have some challenging implications.

The NSW Quality Teacher Program has been intended to provide teachers in NSW with a foundation of professional learning opportunities that:

- link teachers and students' learning needs
- focus on teaching practice as the site for professional learning
- develop the knowledge base of teaching and learning practices

- address the curriculum and assessment contexts in which teachers work
- use a range of delivery modes to give teachers choice in professional learning experiences, and
- strengthen substantive dialogue about teaching practices, collaboration with peers and reflection on practice.

In an attachment to this paper I have included a set of principles derived from the most up-to-date research available about effective professional learning. It is useful to be able to say that these objectives of the QTP as practised in NSW reflect these principles quite consistently.

The first principle, that 'the content of professional development should focus on what students are to learn and how to address the different problems students may have in learning the material', may seem self-evident. However, it may be honoured more in the breach than the observance in widespread contemporary practice. What turns out to be both the second QTP objective and fourth principle is not necessarily how we construct our professional learning activities.

That principle is—'*Professional development should be primarily school-based and built into the day-to-day work of teaching.* Teachers learn from their work. Learning how to teach effectively on the basis of experience requires that such learning be planned for and evaluated. Learning needs arise and should be met in real contexts. Curriculum development, assessment and decision-making processes are all occasions for learning. When built into these practices, professional development can powerfully address real needs.'

We learn as we go. In one of the readings that have been provided as background for this conference the case is put succinctly.

Learning is a basic, adaptive function of humans. More than any other species, people are designed to be flexible learners and active agents in acquiring knowledge and skills. Most of what people learn occurs without formal instruction; but highly systematic and organised information systems—reading, mathematics, the sciences, literature, and the history of a society—require formal training, usually in schools (Bransford et al).

This is a point that I want to come back to, but it is easy to overlook. The default setting in our thinking about professional learning can be that what is in our minds is only what is deliberately put there through formally structured processes. We should bear in mind that that simply is not true.

But we can and do 'develop the knowledge base of teaching and learning practices'. It may seem that teachers' knowledge base is built incrementally and slowly, but there are some good examples of profound change. I think of the impact of 'process writing' and the subsequent developments in thinking about drafting, revision and improvement and the very powerful shift in the notion that to be 'right' really means to be right first time every time.

Each of those QTP objectives can be found in the principles drawn from research, and it is a credit to those responsible that not only do they appear in the program but that there has been a serious effort to live them out in the construction and implementation of the various projects.

To turn now to the second part of the presentation—some comments on the manifold 'P's that you may have trouble placing in discrete boxes. They are significantly interconnected.

Later I will deal with some issues of 'P' for practice, but I think, regardless of the apparent focus of your syndicate work, that it will be valuable if you to reference your thinking and discussion about practice with the principles I have referred to above.

So let's start with 'P' for purpose because, of course, we frame our work with relation to its purpose. I have already made reference to the principle that 'professional development should focus on what students are to learn and how to address the different problems students may have in learning the material', and that is primary.

But I would also like to note that professional learning actually has many purposes some of which are quite diverse. A good deal of teacher professional learning is only *indirectly* related to improving student outcomes.

In 1999, for example, as much professional development in Australian schools was done on topic areas such as school organization and structures, para-legal issues such as occupational health and safety, child protection and so on, social issues such as drug education, and general aspects of teacher welfare as was done on directly classroom related teaching and learning issues (NCS, 2000: 146). This is not in any way to imply that the former set of activities is of low value; it is to underline that teachers' jobs are complex and impacted from a multitude of sources and demands. When you are considering purpose, you might like to add an 's' and make that 'purposes'.

Another way to consider purposes is from the perspective of the nature and needs of participants, and that to some degree is the way the issue has been shaped up for the syndicate to consider. We are members of the teaching profession. Can it also be said that we are members of the 'learning' profession? You would suspect so. Evidence suggests that many, perhaps most, teachers join the profession because of the pleasure they have found in their own learning as well as the pleasure they find in the company of young people and their colleagues. But there are obvious and much discussed differences in the levels of commitment teachers bring to their work.

In fact the tasks of one of the syndicate groups is to consider that very question. The issues they will be dealing with include:

Develop a working definition for *commitment*. This definition should guide your group's discussion and responses to the following questions.

1. What elements contribute to your level of commitment as a teacher?
2. Has your level of commitment changed during your professional life? If so, how has it changed and what has contributed to this change?
3. To what extent does your level of commitment influence your level of work satisfaction?

In what ways might teachers' level of commitment influence student learning outcomes?

Question 2. not only has a bearing on what we might say about the other matters, but also on our considerations of purpose.

This might not seem obvious, but I want to make the point by briefly considering the findings of Huberman (1989), something of a pioneer in describing characteristics of the trajectory of teachers' working lives, largely through conducting a synthesis of several hundred studies of this topic. (We might speculate why this has been a matter of such interest.) He defined a series of phases which can be typically found in teachers' professional lives.

As we consider these phases we should also note his warnings about them. He does not suggest that these phases are exclusive to the profession of teaching; even where there are patterns they are no more than patterns and individual cases will certainly differ; this evolution is not a series of sharply defined events; and many external factors influence the shape of teachers' careers—among them the economic climate, the currents of social and cultural change, and shifts in political and educational priorities. Thus forewarned, you might consider these ideas and their implications for professional learning.

*CAREER ENTRY: 'Reality Shock'—Survival and Discovery:* Two parallel motifs appear to be present during this phase. The first is that of shock and the need to survive—the initial confrontation with the same complexity of professional work that the most experienced members of the profession have to contend with—and its attendant dilemmas: continuous trial and error, preoccupation with oneself and one's sense of adequacy, wide discrepancies between instructional goals and what one is actually able to do in the classroom, inappropriate instructional materials, wide swings from permissiveness to excessive strictness, concerns with discipline and management that eat away at instructional time' (Huberman, 1989: 349).

The second is the theme of 'discovery'—'the initial enthusiasm, the sharp learning curve, the headiness of having at last one's own pupils, one's classroom, one's program, the pride of collegiality and "place" within a profession' (ibid).

The most obvious common needs during this phase of work are for guidance, direction and support. Given the major turnover looming among the members of the teaching profession, we might assume that this is an important group to consider in our discussions of professional learning.

*STABILISATION: Developing commitment:* In teaching terms, the following period is marked by a shift towards more instruction-centred rather than self-centred goals, a growing sense of confidence, more success with the chosen style of classroom teaching, the introduction of, and regular reference to, longer term objectives for students, greater flexibility in classroom management, fewer problems with discipline, and a greater ability to relax while teaching.

This is also a period marked by the assertion of independence, with teachers insisting more on their own prerogatives and the soundness of their own professional judgement, and the joining of, and alignment with the views of, professional associations.

We might assume that here is a group of increasingly active learners who have both much to give, but also much to gain.

While evidence is quite strong concerning these two early phases in teachers' career development, patterns are not as consistent in the periods which follow. There are, however, some trends.

**DIVERSIFICATION AND CHANGE: Experimentation:** One trend is the desire to experiment in order to increase effectiveness in the classroom through the use of new materials, differing pupil groupings, new assignments, different combinations of lessons and exercises. This is often coupled with an increasing focus on the nature of the institution and the system, and their frailties, which inhibit change and improvement. There is often a 'quest for stimulation, for new ideas, challenges and engagements' (ibid: 352). New responsibilities are taken up within the school, and there is a more careful examination of prospects for promotion.

During this phase new challenges, more and better professional information and development, and some opportunities for both professional and personal refreshment appear to be required.

**STOCK-TAKING:** 'I wondered whether I was doomed to die in front of a blackboard with a piece of chalk in my hand': Symptoms vary from being sick of the routine of teaching to much more potent feelings of being locked in to an increasingly arduous cycle of activity with no obvious escape. Such feelings can stem simply from exhaustion, or from disappointment in one's inability to change the current order of practice, but they are often coupled with more radical questioning about 'what have I done with my life'? Is a career shift possible? Is it too late? Do I have any abilities outside the classroom?

Teachers inclined in this way, and haven't we all been at some moments, may need some quite differing forms of professional learning either to whet their appetite for the job again or to pursue differing directions.

**'SERENITY':** *Keeping your distance with increasing certainty:* Several studies give examples of teachers who have invested heavily in their work becoming more modest in the professional goals they set for themselves from their mid-forties on. Frequently this more 'mechanical' approach to work is coupled with a feeling of increased effectiveness in the classroom. The level of career ambition decreases, compensated for by higher levels of self-sufficiency and confidence, a state described by Huberman as 'serenity'.

Such teachers could be an invaluable resource for classroom wisdom and specialist teaching. Their needs seem primarily to be access to periods of personal refreshment which could include study in their areas of interest.

**DISENGAGEMENT:** *Golf and the garden have priority:* During this phase, the teacher's energies are increasingly channelled towards outside pursuits, or toward classroom work of a more modest or more specialised nature. Such a phase includes 'handing over the reins' to younger colleagues and preparation for retirement and its pursuits. For some, retirement is anticipated as a generally positive experience with few regrets and many happy memories. Seniority has brought such teachers a convenient teaching allotment, freedom from unwanted intrusions, and a goal of preserving these privileges and fending off solicitations to increase their level of involvement.

It would seem that at least some of this group would be willing to put their wealth of experience towards mentoring of beginning teachers.

If you agree that these phases have some validity then you will also agree that they will have some impact on how you might construct and target teacher learning activities. But approach this issue with some caution. One of the most interesting findings of the major study of teacher professional development experience *PD 2000 Australia* was that the most experienced group of teachers (20 years or more) participated in more professional development than any other group by level of experience (twice as much as beginning teachers),

found a wider range of purposes for it, enjoyed it more and claimed they drew more benefit from it than any other group (by experience) (NCS, 2000).

What are formally constructed professional learning experiences good for? What can we expect teachers to get from them?

Here it is necessary to generalise fairly wildly because of the enormous range of purposes that professional learning has. One answer, for example, would be—so that they can do their job, meaning 'so that they can incorporate syllabus changes', 'so that they are aware of new child protection issues, 'so that they can conduct VET in schools', 'so that they know the new rules regarding excursions' and so on.

There is also a set of fairly filmy abstractions that might seem to provide answers—the value of lifelong learning for example, or matters related to learning's moral or professional importance. I will try to be more concrete; and this will take us directly into another 'P', a consideration of the Professional status of teachers and teaching.

The second objective of the QTP is that through the operation of the programme the status of teaching in government and non-government schools will be enhanced, because, among other reasons, 'the status of teachers is declining.' This is a finding from *A Class Act*, the report of the Senate Inquiry into the status of the teaching profession (1998: 29). In their submissions to the Inquiry, teachers suggested the following reasons for this being the case:

- the low value placed on education, in its broadest sense
- the low status of children
- feminisation of the profession
- low salary
- inadequate career structure

- casualisation
- poor working conditions
- inadequate recruitment, training and induction practices
- increased work load/crowded curriculum
- increased proportion of time devoted to non teaching tasks such as counselling
- litigation and violence
- lack of control over the profession and over their work
- negative media portrayal
- lack of support from education departments
- attacks by governments
- lack of support and understanding by the general community
- falling entry requirements for teaching, which are both an effect of declining status and a contributor to it (ibid.: 71-72).

It is difficult to place the provision of professional development activity as a response to any item on this list. So where does it fit?

Status is not a straightforward concept, especially when linked with something as complex as teaching. The definition provided in *A Class Act* is as follows:

Status is a measure of the esteem in which an individual, group or occupation holds itself or is held by others (ibid.: 28).

This apparently clear formulation includes a wide range of factors: 'individual, group or occupation' for example, and particularly 'holds itself or is held by others'. And what gives rise to esteem? Who expresses it, significantly? These are very differing ideas which interact in complex ways. This can be readily illustrated by the discussion which follows in the report.

..Status is difficult to measure. It often has to be earned personally but, at the same time, it is often ascribed to someone merely by virtue of their belonging to a particular group. ..Individual status can be described as that which is earned by or ascribed to a person on the basis of personal [professional] merit. ..Many teachers enjoy that kind of regard from students, parents or colleagues.

Group status ... is largely secured as a result of that group establishing itself on some kind of institutional basis, asserting itself as the voice of its members and being accepted by others on those terms. What flows from this is influence on political and financial decision-making processes, a capacity to make other groups or institutions take your interests and needs into account, and the power to attract high rewards for members of the group.

To date teachers have frequently enjoyed individual status but they have failed to establish their group status which would enable them to exercise authority and influence in the way normally associated with a profession (ibid.).

The discussion has shifted very quickly to issues of power with a strong twist towards the type of status defined as 'measures of the esteem in which a group ... is held by others'. This is confirmed by the attribution of factors accorded high status: 'the possession of highly valued and specialised knowledge and skills and, often, large financial rewards' (ibid.). Professional development activity will not contribute to an enhancement of the status of teaching from this perspective. Nor will it help to resolve any of the issues put forward in the list above.

This is an issue which has bedevilled the profession since the advent of school education on a mass scale. Lortie's landmark sociological and historical study *Schoolteacher* (1975) provides clear evidence of this. A *Class Act* refers to aspects of this issue which have recurred over time. The very number of teachers is an issue; the fact that they are not self-employed is another. But it is also something implicit in the role—an odd cross of

nurse and police officer with responsibility for the healthy intellectual and social development of young people as a centrepiece. Despite dealing with the entire youth population, in itself a limiting factor for high social status, the work happens in settings which are only rarely visited by adults from outside the profession. When they are visited, there is often a strong impression gained that they have a fairly earthy register. One of the functions of teaching is also to separately identify more and less able students, a process which can give rise to dispute and anger. Teachers also guide and regulate behaviour which people don't necessarily enjoy and do remember; and while they are reasonably well-off, teachers are unlikely to ever become socially prominent in terms of their wealth.

If one term could be used to describe the common theme of the list above it would be 'under appreciation', and this has been a common and consistent concern evident in the attitudes of teachers in prosperous countries over decades.

'Status' can also mean 'condition', and this meaning of the word provides a far more productive avenue of enquiry about the status of teaching related to professional development and the QTP in particular.

There have been various approaches to dealing with this issue among QTP officers. One has been to simply ask QTP participants whether or not they feel that their participation in a sub-project has enhanced the status of teaching. Answers are mixed. Without further qualification, it is a difficult question to respond to.

Another has been to 'celebrate, affirm and recognise teachers' work' and promote it in the wider community through, for example, public launches of projects and their products, seeking media coverage, encouraging the involvement of high profile guests, distribution of publications to community organisations, and showcases and 'expos' of teachers' work.

In a different vein, teachers have also been encouraged to document their reflections and build stories with opportunities to share them.

Another approach has been to simply assume that this issue relates to how teachers feel about themselves and their work, that participation in professional development activity will contribute to improved morale and professional confidence, and that this is a fruitful line of attack on the pervasive sense of 'under appreciation'.

One project report comments on this issue in the following terms.

The impact of the QTP on the status of teaching is difficult to measure in quantitative terms. However principals interviewed consider that the QTP has raised the status of teaching among the teachers themselves. The participating teachers not only felt enthusiastic about their involvement and their subsequent achievements but also results in their schools have generated very positive responses from colleagues.

Comments used to illustrate this view included:

QTP provides opportunities to engage in dialogue, away from conversation which generate low morale, towards professional learning conversations which generate a belief in themselves.

Teachers are feeling very valued having been given time to develop ideas and projects and being seen as professional.

Anything that values teachers does an enormous amount for their status.

Very many participant comments drawn from other project reports run along the same lines:

If we are informed, we are empowered.

Useful hands-on training which gives me more confidence in my teaching.

We can be recognised as better prepared staff.

I feel that the government recognises the need to ensure that teachers have opportunities to upgrade their knowledge and skills and that I am valued.

And, almost tragically:

Someone cares that we need the opportunity to be brought up to date.

The most remarkable feature of the evaluative data drawn from QTP participants is their very positive nature. Regardless of issue canvassed, activity topic or purpose, area of curriculum, size of the group or mode of delivery, only a very few sub-projects do not have ratings of 70-80+ percent for the 'plus end' of scales used to assess the level of satisfaction with the activity in which participants took part.

Conclusions to be drawn from this evidence are that the ways in which well-targeted, -designed and -delivered professional development activity contribute to the well-being ('status' considered as a condition) of the profession include at least the following.

- Teachers are concerned about their professional efficacy, and appreciate any efforts designed to support it. They interpret these efforts, to some degree at least, as a recognition of the value both of themselves as professionals and of their professional task. It is perceived as a welcome vote of confidence in the value of learning and education.
- Teachers find the process of learning (and being a student rather than a teacher) enjoyable and refreshing. It contributes a momentum and energy to their work, two crucial attributes which they are otherwise required to produce, quite often, on their own.
- Provided it meets the conditions referred to above, professional development is an excellent medium for teachers to think about their work and reflect on ways in which it might be improved, and to establish, secure or confirm a sense of group identity and common purpose. The company of their colleagues is essential to this process.



- Subject to the same qualifications, professional development is an important source of teachers feeling better and more confident about their work and more generically capable of carrying it out effectively.

These are ways of saying that participation in well-tailored professional development activity has virtues related to the status/well-being of the profession per se. The importance of this should never be dismissed.

I have spent some time on these two issues to try to cement some background in place – background from two points of view:

- the variety among teachers and their professional experiences, not just contingent on their level of experience but what sort of school they are working in, the social and other contextual factors of that school, the inclinations of their colleagues and their own predispositions; and
- the remarkable commonality, and this is working powerfully in your favour, of the appreciation of learning opportunities and especially when they are in the company of colleagues.

What source of information do teachers trust most? Consistently, across very many research studies, the most trusted source is information and ideas which come from their colleagues.

This introduces the idea of a professional learning community, and despite having written a short book called *Looks like, sounds like, feels like...a learning community* I am still not quite sure what one of these is like. That is a task for some of you over the next two days.

The school I was writing about in that book, a primary school in a deeply socio-economically disadvantaged area of South Australia, was remarkable in many ways. The staff used the notion of a learning community, I think, to discipline their

work and their learning. It was a striking experience to watch them at work, in their meetings and team groups, and they were certainly learning at a great rate of knots. But that process was not something from which I could produce a list that others could replicate. The underlying factor could be described as deep engagement and very strongly peer-influenced commitment. I have seen the same phenomenon in a number of other schools, but in differing guises on all occasions. What was central? Perhaps a charismatic and determined principal with senior staff who supported his or her drive in a range of ways. But never in the same set of ways.

The most useful thing I can say about this is to refer you back to the fifth research-based principle: 'Most professional development should be organised around collaborative problem solving', and more particularly to its further qualification-'Without collaborative problem-solving, individual change is possible, but school change is not.'

Schools are social institutions, mini-societies, with their own explicit and implicit rules and cultures. Where there is a strong alignment of view and practice, it is likely that those views and practices will have a more powerful impact than in situations where there is a more scattershot and diverse range of views and practice. And yet we value diversity, we value professional autonomy, we value independent thinkers.

This is a paradox which is not easy to resolve. At one level, or perhaps it is from one point of view, is may seem simple. The staff has made an agreement to a set of rules that govern behaviour in the yard. You make sure they are adhered to, but you share duty with someone who apparently interprets them quite differently. There's a problem. The school has adopted a policy to support the whole range of students, but you know that one of the maths teachers will find any way he can to make sure that he only has able students in his classes. There's a problem.

And this brings us to 'P' for policy, because this is one of the important reasons why we have policy, as a reference point for common behaviour, sometimes agreed, sometimes consulted on, sometimes not.

One set of questions to consider concerns the content of policy—what do you put in it? When thinking about teacher professional learning, how prescriptive should or can it be? Is it possible, for example, to turn those research-based principles about effectiveness into an acceptable or effective policy? Would it be valuable to do so? Should policy consider requirements for engagement in professional learning as it does in some parts of the country? Or does that go against the grain of the whole process?

There are major issues here of teacher agency. Do teachers work better on something that other people have constructed, or on something that they have constructed themselves? When you are thinking about 'P' for policy, that is a fundamental question. Differing jurisdictional answers to this question provide a major divide in Australian teaching practice. In some parts of the country teachers do not talk about 'the syllabus', they talk about 'the framework'—a very different proposition.

Another of the background readings suggests that:

As the concern for school reform continues, and ancient dispute—the comparative advantages of prescriptive and autonomous teachers—has re-emerged. Prescriptive teachers follow rules and procedures. They teach in short by formula. Autonomous teachers ... make their own instructional decisions and base their teaching on the requirements of the particular situation. In short, these autonomous teachers act as self-regulating professionals. Prescriptive teaching is advantageous in that it provides modest protection against ineptitude. When all teachers use prespecified methods, even the poorest teacher can be expected to follow an acceptable regimen. But the negative side is that it obstructs and blunts the perceptive judgment skilled teachers can bring to their practice. ...it inhibits the search for better approaches (Rubin, 1989: 31).

Perhaps one of the most challenging groups of teachers to work with present a combination of those attributes—autonomous teachers who operate by formulae. But the problem is real. Should policy perhaps just be procedural, and even then can we devise it in a way that allows for adequate variation in individual cases? Your answers to that question will be most interesting.

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This is the third section of the presentation.

There are four pertinent ways of evaluating formal teacher learning activities:

- *the number participating*, which indicates depth of coverage; (More than one in five Australian school teachers participated in QTP activities during the first full year of operation. In some sectors the degree of penetration has been of a very high order.)
- *levels of participant satisfaction*, which indicate just that; (These have been very high in QTP activities. More is said about that below.)
- *changes to professional practice* as a result of participation; (These are uncertain but have been assessed more frequently than in other similar programmes. Where they have been they suggest that a majority of participants believe their practice has changed to some degree.) and
- *improvements in student outcomes*.

Let me say a further word or two about these matters in your context. In terms of the QTP in NSW what was offered did meet a need in a marketplace which is challenging, and crowded by business and other alternatives. There can be no doubt that the learning activities provided through the QTP in NSW have been professionally satisfying to the vast majority of participants and that they are achieving the two broad intentions of the programme.

A corollary to this point is the evident relevance and quality of the activities offered in the vast majority of cases. The competition for time and attention is a constant theme in discussions of teacher professional development. The high levels of participation and satisfaction alluded to above cannot be derived from poor quality events. The levels of success from these perspectives are clear tributes to those designing and delivering the activities.

But there is another most interesting aspect to the collected data. QTP offerings are very diverse in nature. Mixed mode activity (meaning that more than one type of activity—workshops, action research, development and trialing of materials, access to consultancy and so on—has been included to meet an over-arching purpose) is prevalent. But there are also many instances of 'action learning' or 'action research'. About one quarter of the total number of projects and several of the biggest, locate activity at school- or cluster-level. There are also conference-based activities, seminar and workshops series, train-the-trainer programs, formal courses of study, materials development and so on.

However there is no particular type of activity which yields higher or lower levels of satisfaction. A South Australian evaluation of the QTP in that state refers to this issue as follows.

A clear conclusion from this diverse set of projects is that there are multiple ways of achieving quality in terms of content and process. Although there were differences among the projects, participants and Consortium evaluators generally reported that the projects were of high to very high quality. *It can be seen that this quality was achieved in very different ways* (Russell and Dellit, 2002: 9; emphasis added).

This is also powerfully evident from the evaluative data across the board. How is this to be understood? I think it suggests that, beyond three evident and well-known and understood threshold factors, there is no single pat recipe for teacher professional development.

These threshold factors are largely derived from the demands of the participants themselves, perhaps genuinely 'student-based' learning:

- the credibility and/or authority of the person delivering the activity must be well established;
- the content must have, and be perceived as having, a high level of relatively immediate utility for participants; and
- the learning process and climate must provide for active participation by the widest range of participants.

These are concerns which could be described as classical. Anyone who has had much experience of teacher professional development pays respect to each. I think they deserve more explicit attention.

The last issue I want to comment on is the vexed issue of connecting professional learning and improved student outcomes.

Before doing so it is necessary to reiterate that a good deal of teacher professional learning is only *indirectly* related to improving student outcomes.

However I want to make a brief case for re-considering the way conventional logic linking professional learning and students outcomes proceeds. This conventional logic goes as follows—high quality professional development will produce superior teaching in classrooms, which will in turn translate into higher levels of student achievement (see for example, Supovitz, 2001). I think we might have to think about turning this logic on its head and begin with the outcomes we want to achieve. (If you are still reviewing the research-based principles, refer to the second principle.)

That would certainly be the case with professional learning devoted to, for example, the implementation of a new curriculum structure, something with which NSW teachers have had a certain amount of experience. In this case we have to take as given that the new curricular structure will improve student outcomes (or in some cases that newly defined outcomes can be achieved).

Thus the way the learning process should be evaluated is via the fidelity of the implementation.

However, where the purpose of professional development is to improve student outcomes, as is the case with the QTP, it should be designed in those terms. The formative or starting focus should be shifted quite deliberately, but with some care, from means to ends. It should be result-driven. It should be seen as a primary medium for 'getting something done'.

Apart from reflecting on my failures in trying to establish links from the other direction, there are three major reasons why I have been led this conclusion. (These might be also considered as informing your work on other topics.)

#### **What do teachers know, and how do they learn it?**

My answer, for which there is much evidence, to the first part of the question is a very great deal. At present, the Australian teaching workforce is the most experienced and best qualified it has ever been.

The impact of constructivist approaches is on the agenda for this conference. We cannot even consider constructivism without attending to its basic idea to which I have already made reference – we learn all the time, most learning is informal, and informal learning has at least as much influence on behaviour as formal learning.

Teachers begin teaching with an enormous amount of knowledge of the cultural background and conventions of teaching which, I suggest, are rarely challenged either in their training or by the practice they see around them. And as they progress in their career, the primary and most influential source of their professional knowledge and skill is informal learning through the lived experience of the job.

Thus, a central purpose of teacher professional development (formally constructed learning) is to capture and direct attention and thus raise awareness of issues which require some form of action and response. But for effectiveness, the shift of focus has to be emphatic and protracted, and the demands of the new learning must be acknowledged, accepted, understood and practiced.

#### **Where should we 'place' the task of learning?**

The answer suggested by research and experience is as close as possible to authentic contexts. Principle 4 – 'Professional development should be primarily school-based and built into the day-to-day work of teaching.' This is another lesson from constructivist perspectives.

One evolution we can trace in the theory and practice of teacher professional learning is the move from 'get and go' activities to 'action research' to 'embedded workplace learning', or if you like closer and closer to actual work tasks. This makes sense, and its implications are perhaps more profound than are commonly assumed. Why don't we start with the work task and what needs to be learnt to improve performance?

#### **Can performance be improved without a clearly defined and achievable goal?**

If we were talking about our students our answer, I hope (given 'explicit teaching', given purposeful scaffolding, given their need to understand assessment procedures and outcomes), would be a resounding 'no'. Effective formal learning must have a structure which includes an explicitly defined, achievement-oriented purpose. Why would this be different for teachers?

Teacher professional development is formal learning in that it is a consciously constructed process designed to achieve a defined purpose. Good professional development is task-based.

One way to break the log jam that seems to obstruct the connection between professional development and improved student outcomes is to start from the point of view that the intention is that the latter can and will be achieved—in other words to shift the initial emphasis from means to ends, goals and targets—and to construct professional learning on that basis.

Some of the advantages of this approach are as follows.

- Targets and results are both focused on outcomes for students to be achieved with the assistance of professional learning. The link is not so much made, as unavoidable.
- If they are well-formulated, targets can provide a high level of motivation. They capture attention in an unequivocal way, providing impetus to the work through an explicit focus on what is to be achieved. They also highlight the importance of the task to be undertaken.
- This approach accommodates the incorporation of widely varied learning activities and does not per se define any as superior or inferior. Value comes from what works.
- It embeds learning in the conventional functions of the work site. It also requires a collaborative rather than an individual commitment.
- It assumes and draws on current teacher expertise.
- It is ongoing over a period of time, thus providing for higher and more consistent levels of invested teacher effort.
- It provides an end point for work, not just encouraging urgency, but also well-founded satisfaction or further instigation for improvement at its completion.

- Results are measurable at the site/s of the work and may be aggregated to establish the impact of a programme of professional development, and thus a justification or otherwise for (further) public investment of public funds.
- Evaluation of outcomes is built into the process and provides a far more straightforward means of effectively evaluating the impact of professional learning than others in current use.
- The approach encourages a sense of mission and focus.
- It provides a chance for individual teachers to define some important outcomes of their work clearly and reliably.
- It deliberately encourages more widespread and effective use of data, a step to be taken in the direction of increasing professionalism.
- Achieving targets will provide clear public evidence of the competence and capacity of the profession; achievement on a more limited scale will still produce better outcomes for some students; very limited achievement will provide grounds for self-examination and re-thinking by the profession.

What I am suggesting is that there should be some place, perhaps a central place, for professional development constructed along these lines.

I am not suggesting that all professional learning activity should be based on this approach. As I noted earlier professional development has a very wide range of purposes, not all of which might be approached from this angle.

But it is something for you to consider in your deliberations. I have no doubt that you will come up with better ideas in the course of the next two days, and I wish you well as you think, talk, share and celebrate together.

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## Attachment A

# Improving Professional Development: Research-based Principles

(from [www.nPEAT.org](http://www.nPEAT.org), the website of the National Partnership for Excellence and Accountability in Teaching (Washington DC))

These principles focus on the form-not the content-of professional development. Whatever their content and goals, professional development activities that have the characteristics below are more likely to be effective than those that do not. The principles reflect a synthesis of current research and are influenced by and mapped closely on similar propositions by the US Department of Education and the National Staff Development Council, as well as other organisations concerned with professional development.

1. The content of professional development focuses on what students are to learn and how to address the different problems students may have in learning the material. The content of professional development is critically important to its effectiveness. While the content varies with the goals of the school, or the district, the content of professional development should deal directly with what students are expected to learn and the instructional strategies that research and experience have shown are effective.
2. Professional development should be based on analyses of the differences between a) actual student performance and b) goals and standards for student learning. Goals for student learning provided a basis for defining what teachers need to learn and a yardstick for improving professional development.
3. Professional development should involve teachers in the identification of what they need to learn and in the development of the learning experiences in which they will be involved. Adherence to this principle ensures that professional development is relevant. When teachers help design their own professional development, they are likely to feel a greater sense of involvement. Teachers use what they learn when professional development is focused on solving problems in their own particular contexts.
4. Professional development should be primarily school-based and built into the day-to-day work of teaching. Teachers learn from their work. Learning how to teach effectively on the basis of experience requires that such learning be planned for and evaluated. Learning needs arise and should be met in real contexts. Curriculum development, assessment and decision-making processes are all occasions for learning. When built into these practices, professional development can powerfully address real needs.
5. Most professional development should be organised around collaborative problem solving. Without collaborative problem-solving, individual change is possible, but school change is not. Activities may include interdisciplinary teaching, curriculum development and critique, collaborative action research, and study groups.

6. Professional development should be continuous and on-going, involving follow-up and support for further learning—including support from source external to the school that can provide necessary resources and new perspectives. Adoption and implementation of effective practices requires continued learning. Therefore, the design of professional development must provide time to explore and apply new ideas and, sometimes, must draw on outside expertise.
7. Professional development should incorporate evaluation of multiple sources of information on a) outcomes for students and b) the instruction and other processes that are involved in implementing the lessons learned through professional development. When done right, evaluation of professional development yields important lessons for refining professional development. Without such evaluation, future opportunities for teachers to learn may not be productive. Multiple sources of information should be used, including teacher portfolios, observations of teachers, peer evaluations and measures of student performance.
8. Professional development should provide opportunities to gain an understanding of the theory underlying the knowledge and skills being learned. Because beliefs filter knowledge and guide behaviour, professional development must address teachers' beliefs, experiences and habits. Furthermore, specific knowledge and skills that work in one setting, sometimes do not work in others. When teachers have a good understanding of the theory behind particular practices and programs, they can productively adapt the strategy they learned about to the circumstances in which the teacher is trying to use it.
9. Professional development should be connected to a comprehensive change process focused on improving student learning. Improving teacher capabilities without changing the conditions that influence the opportunities to use these capabilities is often counter-productive. These conditions include time and opportunities to try new practices, adequate funding, technical assistance, and sustained central office follow through. Thus, unless professional development is designed as part of a larger change process, it is not likely to be effective.